

## **Frank Hellmer Oral Testimony- Feb 29, 2024, Senate Aging Committee**

Hello everyone. My name is Frank Hellmer, and I would like to start off by thanking you all for having me here to testify before the Senate Aging Committee concerning my experience with subminimum wage workshops and competitive integrated employment. I am honored and thankful to you all for this opportunity. I am a person with autism who has worked hard and has been blessed with a good job, currently as a Data Analyst at a major health insurer called Centene Corporation. Centene, in my experience, has one of the most inclusive hiring processes I have ever seen, going above and beyond the letter of the Americans with Disabilities Act to embody the spirit of disability employment. I am testifying today on my own initiative, and do not represent Centene or claim Centene's endorsement for being here.

Two things I like about my job are having supportive coworkers as well as work that challenges my mind in a way similar to puzzles. I develop and run SQL scripts, a type of software code, to extract data from databases and send it to its stakeholders. I enjoy it when I get to learn a new trick or new way to do something with my programming skills.

One thing that makes my job accessible is a flexible work schedule, where as long as I am getting stuff done and producing results, they are not too concerned about strict hours. I also work from home, which is helpful for when things get frustrating at work, so I can be as expressive as I want to be and no one at work has to know about it. The flexible schedule also helps me to be able to go to the grocery store with my home and community-based Waiver staff during the day and then come back and make up those hours later in the day or later in the week as well.

Being able to earn good wages has enabled me to obtain my own apartment, go back to school to finish my master's in health informatics, purchase a gaming computer, Nintendo Switch, and Xbox Series S, among numerous other blessings. In my free time, I like to play classic computer games like Doom and Quake due to the multitude of user-made mods and content available for them.

I am able to work in competitive integrated employment because Arkansas has a somewhat unusual program called Workers with Disabilities Medicaid. I am a beneficiary of the Community and Employment Supports (CES) Waiver program, which has a 10-year waitlist. Normally a person receiving SSI benefits cannot earn more than 3 times the monthly SSI rate per month without losing their Medicaid Waiver eligibility. However, the Arkansas Workers with Disabilities Medicaid program overrides the limitation so that you can earn as much as you want and still maintain your Waiver services. With my increased wages, I am able to buy better groceries and stuff that I like, which are mainly electronics and video games. I am also able to save for the future and for retirement as well.

In May 2016, I graduated from Arkansas Tech University with a 3.9 GPA and a double major in Accounting and Business Data Analytics. I was able to get through college in large part due to very supportive faculty, who looked out for me. I also met my best friend Pastor Miller there, who preaches at Glen Rose Missionary Baptist Church, where I still attend today. He made me feel welcome and included me on field trips for professional organizations, like the Society for Human Resource Management conference.

In December 2016, I passed the CPA exam, and in 2017 I started an internship to obtain my CPA experience hours. Unfortunately, pushing for all these goals left little time for me to properly process my grief over my mother's passing from cancer in 2015, and so I mentally broke down in 2018, halting the internship for over a year while I recovered in various institutions before finally being able to get fast-tracked onto a community and employment supports Waiver. I am especially thankful to my friends who continued to believe in me during this dark time and moved mountains to ensure I had the resources and care I needed to recover. Most people would have given up on me.

In 2019, I started working in a subminimum wage workshop. In the workshop, I worked 30 hours per week and made between \$30-120 every two weeks. At the workshop, I worked in a wash bay, washing cars and machinery. I one time spent an hour inside a car wiping windows and seats on a hot summer day. In the middle of 2019, the workshop had a rate adjustment, and our wages started to go down. By October 2019, when I got a \$35 check for working 30 hours per week for two weeks, I quit because the work made me feel exploited.

After quitting the workshop, I went back to try and finish my internship, which I had started back in 2017. After a couple of months back at the internship, in January 2020, a job opportunity came open at Centene, which my financial guardian alerted me to. I applied for it, went through the interview process, and am happily working there today. My four-year anniversary will be in May 2024. Thank you all.